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Introduction: 'Identity, Gender, Politics'

(Claire Gorrara & Vanna Motta)

In this, the second on-line version of *New Readings*, the themes of identity, gender and politics unite our four articles. Each of them focuses on the relationship between the writer and the socio-cultural context of their writing, whether this be post-war Germany, 1960s Mexico, 1970s Italy or 1990s Chile. In their preoccupation with the politics of writing, each contributor is drawn to consider the specific conditions in which literary production takes place and the impact and intended readership of texts which aim to intervene actively in debates of the day. This is particularly true of the articles by Joanne Sayner, Jennifer Burns and Mary Green. Each charts the literary response of a diverse group of writers to periods of social and political crisis in their respective cultures. For Sayner, this turns on how to bear witness to a range of German experiences of the Nazi era. Burns assesses the role of intellectuals and literature at a time when Italy experienced a series of terrorist attacks, shaking confidence in traditional literary projects. While Green explores how one writer, Diamela Eltit, used her writing as an instrument of social intervention in Chile during the Pinochet era and after. Three of the articles, by Joanne Sayner, Lisa Davies and Mary Green, are also concerned to investigate the gendered dimension of this intervention in the public sphere. Sayner and Green analyse the production of women writers who work both with but mainly against the politics of authoritarian and highly patriarchal regimes, whilst Davies engages with prevalent constructions of motherhood in post-war Mexico. All three regard the imposition and perpetuation of patriarchal values as pivotal to an understanding of their writers' work and, in the case of Green and Davies, this proves central for an evaluation of the literary experimentation such writers undertake. Ultimately all four contributions to this volume address the ways in which both individual and collective identities are negotiated through the politics of writing, from wartime experiences to forms of political intervention in the 1990s. The power of literature to invest the social and the political with new meanings and to question received interpretations and dominant ideologies underscores the narrative success of writers from countries as diverse as Germany, Mexico, Italy and Chile.

Joanne Sayner's paper 'For Whom Does One Remember?: Autobiographical Perspectives on Fascism in German Literature' deals with texts by three women writing about their autobiographical experiences of German fascism and the Second World War. Questions of gender, memory and reception are central to Sayner's examination of the ways in which a former member of the Hitler Youth, a resister and a Jewish survivor have positioned themselves in relation to ongoing debates over guilt, responsibility and collective identity in the aftermath of the Nazi era. Sayner, firstly, addresses Melita Maschmann's *Taking Stock: No Attempt at Justification* (1963). She points to the narrative focus on collective identities and the narrator's and protagonist's construction of an elite German generation of youth leaders based on clear national and racial lines. Such a universalising tendency, highlighting tropes of victimhood, contradicts precisely the text's subtitle 'no attempt at justification' and

Sayner argues persuasively for an 'exonerating effect' in a textual fascination with fascism. Alongside this text produced in the then West Germany is Greta Kuckhoff's *From the Rosary to the Red Orchestra* (1972). Kuckhoff's text too is explored in the light of the specific historical context of the 1960s and 1970s but this time from the perspective of an East German writer who was an antifascist resister during the Nazi era. Sayner shows how Kuckhoff is concerned to present a more diverse image of antifascism than was commonly portrayed in East Germany at the time but that this comes into conflict with a 'unifying political teleology', characteristic of the politics of the Cold War period. Finally, Sayner turns to the case of Hilde Huppert's autobiographical work, variously titled but in its most recent 1997 incarnation called *Hand in Hand with Tommy: an Autobiographical Report 1939-1945*. The changing uses and re-constructions of Huppert's memories as a Jewish survivor are charted through the complex publishing history of the text and the different addressees intended for succeeding editions of the memoirs. In conclusion, Sayner discusses how the three texts, in different ways, demonstrate the debates in Germany and elsewhere over the memory of the Nazi era and who is allowed to speak on behalf of whom. Sayner's concentration on the intended addressees of her texts and the books' publishing histories opens up a space to reconsider the gender politics of a predominantly male canon of autobiographical writing and the war years in German-language writing.

Lisa Davies begins her article 'Monstrous Mothers and the Cult of the Virgin in Rosario Castellanos' *Oficio de tinieblas*' by showing how the image of the mother seems to be at the heart of Mexican culture. But whilst the pure and idealised mother is represented by the Virgin of Guadalupe, within the very same culture there exists another more sinister mother figure, that of La Malinche. Patriarchal society imposes on women the myth of the good, self-sacrificing Virgin mother and tries to deny and banish the sexualised, and strong figure of Malinche, perceived as being extremely dangerous to patriarchal values.

In analysing Castellanos' text, *Oficio de tinieblas*, Davies points out how the author, in line with the strong influence of Simone De Beauvoir, maintains that the will to bear children and care for them is a product of social pressure rather than free choice. Throughout her fiction, Castellanos deconstructs the saintly images of the Mother that patriarchy is promoting and shows how the myths created around motherhood are central to a patriarchal society which depends on woman's reproductive function and willingness to nurture the children for it to survive. Davies illustrates how Castellanos' text reflects the status of women, accepted in Mexican society only as mothers, contextualising the experiences of two women, one a biological mother, the other an adoptive mother, but 'monstrous' because they wish, and bring about, in a ritual re-enacting of the Crucifixion, the death of their child. For Davies, Castellanos' text, with its emphasis on race and class, the symbiotic relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor, becomes even more political when the author denounces, in a more sinister and violent re-writing of Biblical narrative, the oppressive and misleading myths surrounding motherhood, which keep women marginalised within the culture and history of Mexico.

In 'Facts, Fictions, Fakes: Italian Literature in the 1970s', Jennifer Burns examines the apparent 'silence' of the literary scene in Italy in the 1970s, a period which is remembered in Italian social and cultural history for the various protest movements, acts of political violence, and the inability of 'professional' politicians to understand the new developments within society. The article explores the literary activity of some Italian writers at the 'centre' of the literary scene, such as Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Leonardo Sciascia, and analyses the reasons why such 'committed' authors abandoned fiction to engage in journalism. Burns' thesis is that the tension found in Italian society marginalised traditional literary forms, such as the novel, since the writer, in order to be read, needed to be 'rapid, precise, shocking'. Increasingly the newspapers and literary magazines gave more space to lengthy articles or open letters in which writers discussed, among other issues, the long-debated problem of the role of the intellectual and culture in modern society.

Burns points out that on the whole literature seemed to emulate what was happening in society at large; as conventional forms of associations and political organisations broke down, literature could only provide a testimony in forms that privileged subjective experience and expression. Thus, the main production of these 'years of tension' seems to be represented mainly by confessional, autobiographical and diaristic writing. At the 'periphery' marginalised voices expressed their anger and frustration with texts of 'protest', extremely successful at the time, but now remembered only as 'colourful souvenirs' of what used to be defined as 'sub-culture'. Burns' conclusion is that in such confusing and confused times, when social and political reality, with all its different versions of plots and subplots, was so difficult to interpret as to appear 'invented', authors abandoned the creation of their own fictional worlds in order to scrupulously analyse the text of Italian society.

In 'Diamela Eltit: A Gendered Politics of Writing', Mary Green discusses the literary project of Diamela Eltit, Chilean writer and activist whose work spans the years of the Pinochet regime (1973-1990) and the present period of redemocratisation. Eltit uses writing and language as an explicit means of protesting against the political, social and cultural transformations of her country. The political and the aesthetic are closely linked in her writing as literary experimentation provides one way of commenting on what Eltit styles the category of the 'feminine', a term which applies to all those oppressed by present and past hegemonic systems of power. Green begins by examining cultural responses to the Pinochet dictatorship and provides an overview of Eltit's involvement in neo-avant-garde movements, along with the theoretician, Nelly Richards. For Green, Eltit's denunciation of the authoritarian regime of the Pinochet era was founded on an important critique of patriarchal values, values which Green reads as constitutive of the moral legitimacy the regime proclaimed for itself. Green looks in detail at some of the linguistic strategies developed by Eltit and in particular the emphasis on motherhood, violence and the voices of the excluded and disappeared. As an example of the meeting of these concerns, the article analyses the problematic of memory in Eltit's novel, *Los vigilantes* (The Guardians, 1996). She focuses on the figure of a mother, Margarita, who houses the silent destitute in a gesture of solidarity with those others wish to erase from comforting im-

ages of Chile as a democracy. As Green persuasively argues in her conclusion, Eltit demands that the reader too engages with the politics of exclusion in contemporary Chile 'constructing meaning through the process of reading rather than accepting as "natural" or transparent that which appears in writing'.

The theme of next year's group of papers will be 'Space and Identity' with papers forthcoming on Spanish detective fiction, contemporary French women's writing and the city in Italian fiction. As ever, we would like to thank those who participated in the 1999-2000 seminar series from which this *New Readings* volume is drawn and, of course, those who gave such stimulating papers. The research group 'Histories, Memories and Fictions' constitutes the seed bed from which such a collaborative venture is possible and we equally extend our thanks to our colleagues. We especially would like to thank Dr Franziska Meyer who has been an integral part of the team and who has moved onto pastures new. We dedicate this volume of *New Readings* to her.